

FALL 2008 SPECIAL TOWN MEETING
ZONING AMENDMENTS & THE 'VILLAGE CENTER' CONCEPT

One of the public purposes underlying the zoning amendments presented at the fall 2008 Special Town Meeting has a long and well-established precedent in Amherst, and is often referred to as 'the village center concept'. Focusing new development into settled centers has been a community goal in Amherst since about 1728, when outlying houses first began to be built in the East District of the Hadley plantation. The historic New England settlement pattern that arose over the next 150 years consisted of densely settled village centers separated by large open stretches of farmland, forests and wetlands, and connected by roadways.

Here are some representative excerpts from various successful community planning efforts in the 20th and 21st century, with pertinent sections *highlighted*:

From the first community planning effort in response to the growth of the University of Massachusetts in the mid-1960s through the early 1970s:

*"Villages – The town should establish five villages, in new and traditional locations, which will complement the town center by organizing functions which are now spreading shapelessly throughout the town. **Future growth and development should be accommodated within these villages. Housing appropriate to the needs of Amherst should be clustered at each village.**"*

[Select Committee on Goals (SCOG) Report, January 29, 1973]

This concept was reaffirmed during creation/amendment of Amherst's village center zoning:

*"The village center zoning proposal is another step in a logical progression of land use regulation changes that Town Meeting has been pursuing for several years—**protecting critical resources areas/open lands, allowing for selected increases in residential and commercial activity, and, now redirecting new development back into existing developed areas.**"*

*"**Focusing development in village centers where infrastructure already exists can avoid Town costs and increase Town revenues. It avoids the high taxpayer costs of suburban sprawl—road maintenance, sewer/water lines, street lighting and fire/police/emergency medical service call areas are all minimized. It puts housing near goods and services, and transportation.**"*

[April 1990 Planning Board Report to Town Meeting]

In 2006, Amherst embarked on *Planning Amherst Together*—a community planning process aimed at developing a Master Plan. The draft Master Plan will soon be turned over to the Planning Board for consideration and adoption. The draft Plan repeatedly mentions the need to direct new residential development to existing centers and neighborhoods, through sensitive infill and redevelopment.

Selected excerpts from the *Key Directions for the Community* section of the draft Master Plan:

Maintain Amherst's existing community character. The preservation of Amherst's community character will require a variety of different approaches, including protecting and promoting adaptive reuse of historic buildings and landscapes, *focusing development in already-developed areas, creating neighborhood design standards that ensure new development is in accord with existing character*, protecting critical conservation lands and farmland, and promoting the local agricultural economy.

Encourage vitality in the downtown and village centers. Amherst's downtown and village centers should be a focus for the community's economic life, cultural vigor, and social activity. Vitality in these areas can be pursued through a variety of initiatives, including *encouraging additional housing development*, economic investment, expansion of cultural facilities, *promotion of a mix of uses*, and improvements to the public realm (parks, streetscapes, and public squares).

Balance land preservation objectives with more intensive development in appropriate areas. Perhaps the most significant theme that surfaced throughout the *Planning Amherst Together* process is the need to protect the Town's significant open spaces, including wildlife habitats, farmland, recreational lands, scenic vistas, and environmentally sensitive areas. Conservation of large tracts of land will require trade-offs in other areas. For example, *in order to deal with rising land prices that can result from reducing the supply of buildable land, higher density development must be allowed and incentives must be developed to direct more growth and increased economic activity to the appropriate areas*.

Promote an ethic of sustainable environmental and energy practices in all Town activities. Amherst citizens have a high degree of awareness regarding environmental and energy issues. This Plan details ways to *protect natural resources, conserve energy, reduce reliance on the private automobile, promote healthier lifestyles, and encourage green building techniques*. Public outreach and education will be a key component in supporting this ethic of sustainability throughout the community. *Requiring greater sustainability in Town policies, regulations and practices can enhance Amherst's ability to provide jobs, housing, security, education, and the other elements of a good life*. It can set the tone for the community, ensure environmental justice, and serve as an example for local businesses and developers.

As the community begins to implement the Master Plan, Town Meeting may expect to see more zoning amendments that are based upon the village center concept.